

Observation and Context

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- 1 That was the opening, or very close to the opening, 10 minutes of Cameron Jamie's film 2002 *Kranky Klaus*. Usually the film is screened with a lively accompaniment. So the music you hear in the background is from a band called The Melvins. Usually The Melvins are playing live and the image is even bigger. The sound is obviously much more important. Cameron Jamie comes from a fine art background; a painting background and he is now working as an anthropologist. Cameron Jamie's work is particularly interesting for me, partly because it deals with performance, such as here. In the year 2000 Cameron Jamie started the "goat project" for which he dressed up in various costumes, goes back to his home town of Northridge in the Santa Anna valley in California. He might dress up like a kind of Dracula and then going to supermarket buying something, and this one witness gives a kind of testimonial to a professional illustrator who then makes a drawing, based on this testimonial account. There is somebody who witnessed the performance and gives a testimonial, after that a professional artist (an illustrator) makes a drawing based on that testimony. In a sense, it is far away from a performance as possible, you get a long way from it. In 2002 in Middleburg in Belgium to see the Jamie's work you have to climb the concrete mountain, a pile of concrete, with a lamp, on your own and when you were coming down on the other side, there were this kind of gothic statues, these renaissance statues from the building, with the pictures around their necks, with these ropes, reintroducing performances into how you actually see this work. It is an interesting thing around performance. There is this idea that there are these degrees of separation from the performance. You have the performance and it is one thing to witness that, and you have then the various forms of documentation of performance. And you might think of Gunter Kloppe who photographs Beuys' performances and taking things that particular way. What Cameron Jamie wants to do with "Kranky Klaus" is to immerse you as a viewer, in order to see your response. Various articles have been written about this film and Jamie's other work, such as Ralf Rugoff's article called "Backyard anthropology". There, he defines Jamie as a kind of backyard anthropologist and the fact that he is an amateur, which is an interesting position, allows him to get away with all sort of things that professional anthropologists can't do. However, according to

Jamie and the critics about his work, this quality of immersion that you experience by watching this film is in direct contrast to what visual anthropology attempts to do.

- 2 At the same time for someone who comes from an art background but who is now an anthropologist, as I am, it is interesting to wonder why there is this opposition. Why is the artist trying to immerse you and why is the visual artist trying to do the opposite? I am sure that some film with a kind of loud music like this seems particularly good at immersing you and therefore visual anthropologists will have to struggle quite hard to not immerse you. So I am interested in this particular issue and I guess one other reason comes from what an anthropologist, Hugh Brody, has called the “reverse alchemy” of anthropology : that anthropology frequently turns the gold of specific encounter with other kind of people in other cultural contexts into the lead of anthropological writing. And so I am interested in the possibilities of changing that around. Anthropologists have a long history of focusing on ritual and visual anthropology as much as current anthropology intends to write a text. Ritual performance seems to offer a nice form of “build in narrative”.

Discussion

- 3 **Bernard Müller:** It is important to show that humour, satire and burlesque can also be part of the anthropological experience. I enjoyed this image of the anthropologist as an inverted alchemist who transforms “the gold of specific encounter with other kind of people in other cultural contexts into the lead of anthropological writing”, and on that road getting rid of the context and the construction of the object.
- 4 **Craigie Horsfield:** I see your point regarding conventions of anthropological film making: the majority of artists working with this material aim to work with an immersive effect. There is a long list we could make but here is a question with this specific film: “The Melvins”, why The Melvins? Tell me the story.
- 5 **Chris Wright:** It is linked to the way Cameron Jamie’s work is framed. Cameron Jamie is an amateur ethnographer. He is allowed to look at all this bit of culture; of “low culture”, “public culture” that anthropologists are concerned with. He did things on wrestling, on Halloween decoration that people do in their houses and things like that. So, I guess that The Melvins is part of that aesthetics; there is a kind of “grunge aesthetic”.
- 6 **Craigie Horsfield:** Sure, if you were filming similar kinds of ritual in Norway for example, and there are very similar performances there, you could link it to death metal, black metal, Norwegian Black metal and you could make a direct correlation. The Melvins seem to me to be an entire random choice.
- 7 **Chris Wright:** Music has a very powerful and strong effect. Concerning The Melvins, it is a fairly random choice in that sense.
- 8 **Craigie Horsfield:** It is a serious question as you gather. Because speaking about the immersive that involves our engagement, in some form or other. That engagement may depend on a degree of belief or thrust. I am not saying it must be, but it is a question to you. What is the degree of thrust, the degree of complicity required of the audience within this kind of contract that the artist and you, presenting it and putting it before us today?

- 9 **Chris Wright:** I think, it is a very interesting point and I will have a very clear answer on that. I think, some of the things like performance, and when you are talking about an actual performance you have all this accounts surrounding Gina Panes performances where the participants are trying to intervene and stop her doing things. There is a very clear sense of the contract. Once you are in a sense documenting that and then you are getting these removes apart from the performance. What you need to do is to divide out different kind of complicities. Those involved in the actual performance there are some very interesting social contracts going on between the participants in this. When I went to see it in London, in Round House in Camden it was much a teen age audience who was going for the music and the film was incidental to that. Many of them didn't watch it most of the time. I think there is very much a sense of a contract. You know what is required from an audience when you are entering into that kind of representation and I think that is worth thinking across anthropology and art, and it might be different.
- 10 **Craigie Horsfield:** I think you are absolutely right. This question of the audience who is also for us: where we place ourselves; and where we exist within it is a crucial question?
- 11 **Chris Wright:** Actually, he is a practitioner. I am a practitioner. He is coming from an art background. Because I don't have a kind of history of exhibitions, it's very hard to show it in an art space. If I send a film to an ethnographic film festival, they will say: "this is clearly art!" In this sense, there are different contracts in different spaces, as well as different audiences.
- 12 **Public:** Do you consider that filming is a performance in itself? And can you explain a little bit more about "performance", "witness", "document" and "representation". Could you also explain the relationship you have drawn between all these notions? Is it like a logic chain?
- 13 **Chris Wright:** Obviously there has been a lot of talk within anthropology about that chain of connections. Not all of them are useful. You have an anthropologist in the situation and he is witnessing a performance and what is he missing or seeing? There is a relation between certain kind of witness and what witnessing might involve. I am constantly surprised when I look at the incredible diversity and amazing kind of rituals that have been documented by anthropologists in a totally non interesting way. Even a very small glance at how certain kinds of performances are being documented would suggest a whole range of other ways of doing that. I think that's up for a kind of negotiation, and a kind of exploration; it tends to be assumed in a particular way in anthropology.
- 14 **Chris Wright:** I find a lot of lack in anthropological engagement with media and the possibilities of media. I wonder if there is a fear to engage with emotion and that might be certainly part of it: and you want your audience react in a particular way: engagement with audiences, engagement with different kind of experiences; every one else is part of what you do. Once a film is made, it has its own life and you can't control all of that. One of the things, it's always good to get students to think about literally a sort of biography, in terms of material object, of what happens to a piece of anthropological writing. Where it starts in somebody's notebook, and then it goes on a computer, it's printed out and then it goes to a library. You know, there is something telling about that material, worth to make a biography of it.

ABSTRACTS

Anthropologists often criticize contemporary art as failing to provide the kinds of contextualization they consider essential to their discipline. This misperception allows them to dismiss works of art easily. In addition, the concern for contextualization, when taken by anthropologists as a rationale for producing visual work, often results in films utterly lacking vital elements of the events they supposedly set out to portray. Art critics often refer to the work of artist Cameron Jamie as "backyard anthropology" because it documents elements of popular culture. Using a clip from one of Jamie's recent films, Chris Wright will argue that often it is precisely this lack of context that is key to experiencing film and to understanding events. This argument will be further developed using clips from observational films by anthropologist John Marshall and another contemporary artist, Ron Lapid.

Certains anthropologues critiquent le travail d'artistes contemporains qui œuvrent en dehors de tout contexte, élément qu'ils considèrent essentiel à leur discipline. Mais inversement, l'excès de contextualisation de certains films des anthropologues donne un manque de vitalité. En revanche, des critiques d'art ont qualifié la façon qu'à l'artiste Cameron Jamie de documenter des éléments de la culture populaire de « jardin anthropologique ». Utilisant un extrait d'un de ses derniers films, l'auteur montre que, contre toute attente, la compréhension des événements peut découler du manque de contexte. Cet argument est développé en utilisant des extraits des films dits d'« observation » de John Marshall et de Ron Lapid.

AUTHOR

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Ayant reçu une formation visuelle, Chris Wright, dirige actuellement la Maîtrise d'anthropologie visuelle à la Goldsmiths de Londres. Ses recherches concernent la relation entre photographie, matérialité et mémoire dans les îles Salomon. Il est coéditeur (avec Arnd Schneider) de *L'art contemporain et l'anthropologie* (Berg 2006). En 2000, il a co-organisé la conférence « Au-Delà du texte ? », à l'Université de Manchester.